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PART OF A LEAF FROM THE FABLES OF BIDPAH, EARLY FIFTEENTH CENTURY

#### MOHAMMEDAN MANUSCRIPTS

THE seven leaves from thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Mohammedan manuscripts and the one complete book of the same period, recently purchased and now shown in the Near Eastern Rooms, are the first examples of primitive Persian and Arabian painting which the Museum has secured, none of the previous acquisitions in this field antedating the full perfection of the art in the sixteenth century. The newly purchased miniatures represent the earliest beginnings of pictorial art in the Mohammedan East, where for the first six centuries of Islam, the prohibition by the Prophet of all representation of animate beings had prevented the development of any permanent art involving picture-making. Such an art became possible only with the rise to power of the Shiites, the more liberal of the two great sects into which Moslemism was divided, and the downfall of the opposing and orthodox Sunnites. The latter sect had long ruled the nearer East through the Fatimid Sultans in Egypt and the glitteringly corrupt Caliphs of the Abbasid line at Bagdad; but when these two great dynasties entered on their period of final decay about the end of the twelfth century, and the rise of new and less orthodox monarchies became inevitable, the artists and artisans of those regions began to disregard the ancient prohibitions, and to make their first essays in the pictorial art which

they were later to bring to such perfection. With the passing of the old limitations of subject the artist opened his mind to foreign influences and borrowed freely from the art of ancient Egypt, contemporary Byzantium, and, above all, contemporary China, so that the work of the period represents in varying degrees the conjunction of these elements with native traditions of ornament, originating in Sassanian and earlier Mesopotamian civilizations. These traditions had never languished even in most orthodox times, however limited their expression, so that when at last it became possible for the native craftsman to turn to picture-making, he did so with an inherited and unique skill of hand, and as a result his work combines splendid artistic facility with the fresh vigor of the primitive artist solving for the first time the problem of the depiction of nature. The earliest existing examples of such Mohammedan representation are the figures of men, animals, and birds on the inlaid metalwork made in the twelfth century at Cairo, Damascus, and Mosil, and on the decorated pottery of Rhages and Sul-tanabad, dating from the same period.

Of the contemporary miniature painting, which surely was not more backward than the other arts, only two manuscripts are known to exist, and a leaf from one of these is included in the Museum's new purchase. The book is an Arabic translation of the *Materia Medica* of Dioscorides, written and illustrated by Abdallah ibn al-Fadl, in the year 619 A. H. or

1222 A. D., according to a signature on another leaf from the same manuscript in private possession. The work was probably executed in Bagdad under the Abbassids and may be the earlier of the two manuscripts just referred to, as the date of the other, the *Treatise on Automaton*, is the subject of dispute.\* The miniature from the *Dioscorides* owned by the Museum shows a physician tasting doubtfully medicines which he prepares in various



LEAF FROM ASTRONOMY  
ABOUT 1300 A.D.

vessels set before him; the strong, dark colors, the arrangement of the drapery, and the drawing of the figure and accessories indicate the direct influence of Byzantine models.

Next in age among the recent acquisitions is a complete astronomy illustrated with drawings of the constellations in red and black outline, dating from about 1300 A. D. and reflecting strongly the persistent

\*E. Blochet. *Peintures de manuscrits, arabes à types byzantins* in *Revue archéologique*, 1907. F. R. Martin. *The Miniature Painting and Painters of Persia*, etc., p. 7, vol. I.

Chinese influence which superseded the Byzantine in Mohammedan art. The drawings resemble closely the figures on the finely decorated Rhages pottery already referred to. The book contains 197 pages and its completeness indicates how elaborate a science of astronomy had been built up in the East at this time. The only two similar manuscripts at present recorded are one in the British Museum (Arabic 5323) and one in private possession in Paris.

Executed about the middle of the fourteenth century are three leaves from an early copy of Firdusi's *Shah Namah* or *Book of Kings*, the national epic of Persia. The pages contain four miniatures illustrating the heroic story of Rustum and are full of the fierce vigor of primitive art. In the four scenes Rustum is shown wrenching from the saddle the King of Hamavaran; capturing the charger Rakhsh from among the wild horses; saved by Rakhsh from a lion which attacks the hero sleeping in the desert; and roasting his quarry over a wayside fire. The miniatures are perhaps the earliest existing representations of Rustum in the brown tiger-skin cuirass which he wears throughout the course of Persian painting, while the horses are accoutred in mail probably of Chinese origin. The drawing is vivid, and the disposition of colors and masses most accomplished. The miniatures may be ascribed to the earlier Timurid-Mongol school.

Next in the chronological sequence come portions of three leaves from the *Fables of Bidpah*, a manuscript of the early fifteenth century, which show the gradual approach to a full mastery of the art of miniature painting. The little flowering plants and the bullock and the lion which are represented have in some respects a curiously modern feeling.

Included in the purchase of the primitive miniatures were three later full-page paintings representing the highest achievement in the art. They are from a copy of the *Haft Paikar*, or *Seven Effigies*, a romantic poem by Nizami, and were executed by Agha Mirak early in the sixteenth century. Mirak, next to Behzad, whose master he probably was, is perhaps the greatest of all Persian painters. His Carpaccio-like



LEAF FROM MATERIA MEDICA OF DIOSCORIDES  
WRITTEN AND ILLUSTRATED BY ABDALLAH IBN AL-FADL,  
1222 A.D.

imagination and extraordinary technical skill distinguish him from his many unidentified contemporaries. His work is shown at its best in the Great Nizami presented to the Museum last spring by Mr. Alexander Smith Cochran — a manuscript which is one of the unrivaled monuments of Near Eastern Art. With the three new miniatures Agha Mirak's work is probably better represented in this Museum than in any other collection.

A still later drawing in grisaille, recently presented to the Museum by Dr. Friedrich Sarre of Berlin, represents the last great phase of Persian miniature painting, when color had been superseded by line, and

complex decorative effect by a desire for reality and portraiture. The miniature shows a woman sewing, and comes from the sketch book of Riza Abbasi, the final figure of distinguished merit in Persian art. The sketch has been pierced with innumerable small holes so that by "dusting" it could be used as a pattern for various replicas. Many of the drawings from this sketch book, the authenticity of which cannot be doubted, have been treated in the same manner and form an interesting key to the technical methods employed in producing some of the most delicate and accomplished miniatures in the history of art.

D. F.



LEAF FROM FIRDUSI'S BOOK OF KINGS  
TIMURID-MONGOL SCHOOL